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KNOWING GOD

By Alan Hogarth

It was a cold, blustery day in a seaside town. Feeling bored and with a desire to get out of the cold I persuaded my family to enter one of the attractions on the promenade. It was a *Hall of Mirrors*. Everywhere you looked there was a reflection that seriously distorted your image. I could be fat, thin, pear-shaped and lots more. It passed a few minutes of our time but outside this building the real world still existed. Those mirrors were never meant to reflect the real me, and if anyone thought they were true images of the real thing we would think they were quite mad.

If we want to know what God is like where would we look? We could look at the world with its broken relationships, its disasters and the suffering that confronts us daily. If we did, we would not find a true picture of God. Whoever thought that looking at the world and its suffering would give us a true picture – it would be like a *Hall of Mirrors* – it would be a distorted view of God.

The Bible encourages us to find a true picture of God elsewhere. There are simply two places to look to find God truly represented. The first place we must look is the Bible itself.

The Word of God

In the Bible God is clearly revealed to us. He is our Creator and law-giver. The angels in heaven are portrayed as praising God for his holiness. In Isaiah's vision of the temple we read:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

When God revealed his glory to Moses he uses these words: *Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."*

The Bible clearly reveals God to us in words that are familiar and precious. He is holy, just and faithful, and He is love.

The second place to discover what God is truly like is to look at the Lord Jesus Christ. He is fully man and fully God. Article 2 expresses this clearly:

"The Son, which is the Word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, the very and eternal God, and of one substance with the Father, took Man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin..."

To understand what God is like we need to consider the life of Jesus Christ; his compassion, his teaching, his miracles and his willingness to die.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Here are the places to look if we want to know what God is like. To look at the world will not only give us a distorted picture of God, but an idol that can easily be rejected. It is only when we have considered what God is truly like can we begin to understand the world we live in.

The Fall

We only need to read the first 3 chapters of the Bible to understand the world we now live in. Indeed these opening chapters of the Bible are complete in themselves. They tell us how the world was made, and account fully for the suffering that we now see. A holy and just God could have ended the revelation of himself at the end of chapter 3 and we would know all we need to know about our world. (One verse however stands out Genesis 3:15, and the rest of the Bible is the working out of that one verse.)

So what happens? After Adam's sin the world comes under God's judgment. Justice demands that sin is punished. Sin is an offence to God and spoils everything:

- i) It spoils our relationship with God. How can a holy God have a relationship with sinners? So the first human beings are expelled from the garden and God's presence.
- ii) It spoils our relationships with each other. Here begins the battle of the sexes, and by chapter 4 we have our first murder.
- iii) It spoils the environment. Weeds and thistles grow, the lovely garden becomes the harsh reality of the world we live in.

The world that God pronounced 'good' has totally changed. The world is no longer good but evil, and to try and find the good God here would be a folly. However, God is not only holy and just, he is also the God of love, so he does not leave mankind in their rightful condemnation but continues to work out his purposes.

The Law

Have you ever considered the structure of the 10 commandments? They are God's instructions to fallen human beings to reverse the effects of the Fall.

- i) Sin spoils our relationship with God and so the commandments begin with our relationship with God and how to restore it.
- ii) Sin spoils our relationship with each other and so the commandments tell us how to live in order to restore it.
- iii) The result is to restore the environment in which we live, to enjoy God's promised land,

“Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.”

The problem is, as the Old Testament makes clear through the sacrificial system, we cannot keep the law. It is beyond us. God is not at fault, we are.

The Gospel

So we come to our final part of understanding God. The promise of Genesis 3:15 is fulfilled when the Virgin Mary gives birth to the one who is Emmanuel, God with us. He is the one who reverses the effects of the Fall.

i) He restores our relationship with God by taking our sin and dying in our place.

ii) He restores the relationship we have with each other by creating one church, *“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*

iii) He restores to us the perfect environment to spend our eternity, where *“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”*

Our glorious God has given us a true understanding of himself and his creation. So let’s not allow our view to be distorted by the world we live in and those who seek to find God other than those places where he has chosen to reveal himself.

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